

Women increasingly pick husbands' surnames over their own

November 16 2005

What's in a name – or two names? Quite a bit, says a University of Florida professor, whose research finds that a growing number of brides are returning to tradition when taking a man's hand in marriage, assuming his name instead of keeping their own as a symbol of independent identity.

“Adopting a husband's last name remains an entrenched tradition that is on the upswing, despite a temporary blip in the '70s, '80s and early '90s where many young women tended to want to hold on to their birth names,” said UF linguistics professor Diana Boxer, who led a series of studies. “I think it reflects how men's power continues to influence American society despite the fact that women have made great advances economically and socially.”

The exception is highly educated women in academic and professional positions, said Boxer, whose research was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

The survey involved 134 married women ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s who lived in various parts of the United States. Boxer found that only 24 — 18 percent — had kept their own names, compared with 107 — 77 percent — who took a husband's name. The rest used hyphenated or other names. Family unity was the most frequently mentioned reason.

“Taking on my husband's last name was an outward sign of our union,”

explained one woman. “It served to make me feel that I was ‘really married’ and that we were forming a brand new family.”

Children were the most important issue of family unity for these women, who sought to avoid the hassle and confusion of having more than one surname in the family, Boxer said. But while divorced women would not return to their birth surname because they wanted the same name as their children, they did not hesitate to adopt a new husband’s name at remarriage, even though it meant their name now differed from that of their children, she said.

While all the women who retained their birth surnames were satisfied with their choice, some who changed expressed regret, Boxer said. “I associate my new surname with my husband’s relatives, whom I dislike,” said one participant. Another woman was disappointed to lose a symbol of her ethnic heritage in giving up her Italian name.

Understanding naming traditions is important because they give clues about underlying social patterns and shifts in attitudes about expected roles for women, said Boxer, who presented some of the findings at the International Association of Applied Linguistics meeting in Madison, Wis., in July. “People say ‘It’s only a name, what’s in a name?’ Well, we think there’s a lot in a name,” she said. “Linguistic symbols tell us how people are treated in society.”

The practice of women automatically taking their husband’s surnames was first challenged in the mid-19th century by abolitionist Lucy Stone, Boxer said. From then on, women who retained their birth names after marriage came to be called “Lucy Stoners,” with negative connotations, she said.

“In a 1997 study of more than 10,000 Midwesterners, men thought women who kept their surnames were more likely to work outside the

home, less likely to enjoy cooking, less likely to attend church and – this is the clincher – less likely to make good wives,” she said.

Other cultures are more accepting, Boxer said. In rural Pakistan, women retain their birth names unless they need to request a government document, while in Norway children automatically receive the mother’s name unless a couple tells authorities otherwise, she said.

Among 103 Russian women whom Boxer’s co-author, Elena Gritsenko, surveyed in a cross-cultural comparison, only 17 percent retained their birth surname at marriage. But while most Russian women mentioned cultural traditions and the desire to maintain good relations with their husband’s family, American women expressed more romantic notions, she said.

“Ever since I have been a little girl, I’ve been dreaming of the day I change my name to my future husband’s name, and I still feel that way,” said one young woman in Boxer’s class.

Among 18 female students in Boxer’s sociolinguistics class that she interviewed as part of a separate study, 11 said they would take their husband’s surname, three would hyphenate, three would use both names, and only one said she would retain her birth surname.

While women say taking their partner’s surname symbolizes their union, few men have such sentiments, said Boxer, noting that it is rare for the male partner to consider changing his surname. “Why do even young women who hold feminist viewpoints look forward to taking their husband’s surname?” she said. “Why do women do the merging?”

Marlis Hellinger, a linguistics professor at the University of Frankfurt/Main, said naming practices are a “central issue in research on language and gender. Boxer’s important contribution focuses on

questions of change and explanations, but also opens up the field to include cross-cultural perspectives.”

Source: University of Florida

Citation: Women increasingly pick husbands' surnames over their own (2005, November 16)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2005-11-women-increasingly-husbands-surnames.html>

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